

## IN THE FIELD

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LI LIFE

## After a river cleanup, freedom

BY BRYN NELSON  
STAFF WRITER

The red-topped cooler did not contain a lunch, as might have been surmised by anyone watching the three men who had driven to a newly restored stretch of the Peconic River on a rain-soaked afternoon.

Safely stowed inside, within matching cream-colored pillowcases, 14 Northern water snakes were about to taste freedom.

Over the past few years, reptiles of all stripes have received a helping hand at Brookhaven National Laboratory, where surprising caches of Eastern hog-nose snakes and Eastern spadefoot toads, rare Northern red-belly snakes, and both native and reintroduced spotted turtles have found sanctuary in the midst of habitat loss elsewhere.

One of the men gathered for the latest release, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service herpetologist Jeremy Feinberg, said pit tags lodged beneath each snake's skin would permit researchers to positively identify any of the serpents captured in the future.

The nine-month snake odyssey began last summer. At that time, a male and female Northern water snake were discovered in the midst of a comprehensive cleanup of mercury and other contaminants in sediments of the Peconic River on lab property. At the behest of Norman Soule, director of the Cold Spring Harbor Fish Hatchery & Aquarium, both reptiles were transferred to the hatchery for a winter retreat and a



Norman Soule, director of the Cold Spring Harbor Fish Hatchery & Aquarium, with an adult Northern water snake. It and 13 juveniles, some of which are pictured above right, were recently released into the Peconic River.

steady diet of green frogs until they could be reacquainted with the restored river.

But soon after her arrival, the female gave birth to a brood of 13, dramatically upping the number of temporary tenants.

Ornery when cornered, the snake species known as *Nerodia sipedon* is nonvenomous

but will bite, spray a foul-smelling musk and even defecate in an attempt to discourage predators or unwary handlers. The snake is common throughout New York state, but less abundant on Long Island and especially scarce in Nassau County.

Soule said overdevelopment and thrashings by residents



who mistake the snakes for venomous water moccasins have likely contributed to the decline. In the absence of a regular count on the Island, though, the true number is a matter of pure speculation.

For an afternoon, anyway, there would be at least 14 in a shallow stretch of the Peconic.

The adult male went first, with a loosening of his pillowcase confines and a brief photo session by the river. As black as a bicycle tire and with thin yellow banding, the snake promptly slithered back toward the road, perhaps unaware that the more inviting water lay only yards behind him. With prompting by Tim Green, natural resources manager at the lab, the male reversed course and soon vanished beneath fallen branches at the river's edge.

The initial moments of freedom for the foot-long juveniles began a bit more tentatively once Soule loosened the knot on the second pillowcase and lowered it to the ground. A few of the braver snakes soon set off through the underbrush, while their siblings peered from the pillowcase edges as if uncertain how to proceed.

An upending of their cover forced decisions among the

wriggling mass of surprisingly distinctive snakes: Some were nearly black while others bore faint, yellow marks or bolder bands that set off blocks of skin ranging from jet black to reddish-brown.

The mother of the brood, who died unexpectedly only 10 days before the release date, would not witness the departure of her multicolored young. But the 13 siblings, raised on a diet of fathead minnows within the fish hatchery, had gained a significant head start over their counterparts in the wild, increasing their odds of survival.

Their fates seemed less certain at the riverbank spotted with tussock sedge. Chain pickerel, ducks, herons or other predators all could put an early end to their new freedom.

"If you see a kingfisher, throw rocks at it," joked Soule.

At least one of the young reptiles had successfully navigated the width of the Peconic, though, and Soule pointed it out with evident admiration.

"That's what I call an adventurous snake," he said. "I'm not sure crossing an open channel is the best way to start its life, but he got away with it."

He grinned, and carried the empty cooler back to the truck.

## NOW ON NEWSDAY.COM

To see other photos of the snakes that were released and to read other accounts of reptiles on Long Island, go to [www.newsday.com/li](http://www.newsday.com/li).

## THE MONTH OF JUNE

Most birds have stopped migrating in June. They've settled into their nests. Most of them are loners. But not the gull.

To see a community of nesting gulls, take a ride down the Robert Moses Causeway to the parking lot at Captree State Park. Gulls don't build nests. They lay their eggs on whatever real estate is available, blacktop included.

They can be very territorial. The gull is not much for fighting, according to Ritchie B. Lettis, owner-operator of the Wild Bird Center in Stony Brook, but they do engage in what ornithologists call "grass pulling." If bird A tries to settle too close to bird B's nest, bird B will pull out a beak-full of grass, give it a violent shake and toss it at the intruder as if to say, "Watch it, buddy, or this is what I'm going to do to you."

For the birdwatcher with more esoteric tastes, there's the gorgeous indigo

bunting that makes its home in Hoyt Farm Nature



Indigo buntings may be spied at Hoyt Farm

Center, a Smithtown park shaped like a slice of pie nestled between New Highway and the Northern State Parkway west-bound service road.

June is also the start of the great shorebird migration. Sandpipers on their way north spend time around Jamaica Bay and along Dune Road, though there's not much parking there.

Looks like there's an abundance of one of nature's most lovable quadrupeds, the chipmunk. These little guys have adapted to housing development living. They live in shallow burrows, decayed tree trunks and fence corners. They're reddish-brown, with five black stripes on their backs separated by brown, white or gray fur stripes. They have white or dark marking

around their eyes. They eat nuts, acorns, seeds, mushrooms, berries and corn. They also eat insects and young mice. Good to have around.

— BILL MCTERNAN

## OUT AND ABOUT

**A SWAMP AND A BOG.** Explore the Cranberry Bog County Nature Preserve in Riverhead and see an unusually high concentration of rare plant species — orchids included. Also see the recovering cranberry bog and the Atlantic white cedar swamp. Led by Andrew Greller, professor emeritus of biology at Queens College, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Sunday, June 5. For adults. Call 631-581-6908.

**HILLY HIKE.** A 5-mile walk through the Manorville Hills. Bring snacks and water. Rain cancels. Pine Barrens Trail Center County Park, Manorville. 9 a.m. June 11. 631-775-6272.

**ON THE MARSH.** A 5-mile walk for adults through the fields and forest of Caumsett State Park in Huntington will provide an introduction to salt-marsh life, 9:45 a.m. to 1 p.m. June 12. Bring water and waterproof shoes. Reservations required; \$3, \$6 fee per car, Caumsett State Park, West Neck Road, Lloyd Neck. Call 631-423-1770.

## NOW ON LINATURE.COM

A searchable calendar of natural world events is online at [www.linature.com](http://www.linature.com).

**BAT WALK.** Indoor activities will give way to a nighttime stroll to observe bats from 7:30 to 9:30 June 24 at Connetquot River State Park, Sunrise Highway, Oakdale. Registration required; \$2 for children between 5 and 12 years old, \$3 for adults, parking is free. Call 631-581-1072.

**SASSAFRAS AND SHADBUSH.** Mary Laura Lamont, a naturalist and park ranger for the National Park Service, leads a walk for adults through this unique forest of American holly, sassafras and shadbush at Sailor's Haven at the Fire Island National Seashore, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. June 18. Call 631-581-6908.

**SHORE WALK.** An indoor presentation geared to families shifts to a shoreside sunset walk in Sunken Meadow State Park in search of horseshoe crabs, which date to the age of the dinosaurs. At the BOCES Outdoor Learning Laboratory at Sunken Meadow, in Kings Park, 7:30 to 9 p.m. June 25. For reservations, call 631-581-6908. — LAURA MANN